

Not Giving Up

by englishtutor

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Summary: Sixteen-year-old Mary Morstan, newly orphaned and placed with strangers, was brutally assaulted by the man legally appointed to protect her. How did she survive? Within the fortress of memory; with the power of words. . . . Warming for adult situations. This story is a prequel to "Chance Meetings" and "To Hold Her Heart".

1. Chapter 1

My heartfelt appreciation and everlasting gratitude to my lovely and long-suffering betas Wynsom and Fang's Fawn, and to the wonderful and generous mrspencil, who is the Brit-pick extraordinaire and a fount of valuable information.

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Sixteen-year-old Mary Morstan, newly orphaned and placed with strangers, was brutally assaulted by the man legally appointed to protect her. How did she survive? Within the fortress of memory; with the power of words. . . .

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Her thoughts slowly emerged from the protective blackness into an awareness of suffering. Nothing existed in her nearly-conscious mind at that moment but unadulterated pain. Every nerve ending in her body was standing on end, screaming in agony, crying out for attention: _Do something!_ She curled in on herself, her breath coming in short, painful gasps. Her hands didn't know whether to try to sooth her throbbing head or the feverish agony that was her stomach. As she became more aware of herself, the nausea grew; she retched painfully, ending in a quavering cry of anguish as the action contracted abused muscles and organs. Vague thoughts flickered through her, floating in a haze: "What happened? Where am I?"

Then with a sudden brutality, the memories came flooding back: entering the kitchen; being backed into a corner; resisting her assailant; great hands, bigger than her head, striking; steel-capped boots kicking; meaty, sweat-slicked fingers groping; a broken bottle wielded in fury; falling into blackness. Now she was aware that she was lying on rough ground, no longer inside, freezing, hurting, bleeding. Panic rose within her chest and took her breath. Her fingers clutched at her arms in a self-protective gesture and she bit her lips. What if he were still here?

Feeling the familiar material of her coat helped to calm her, to ground her into sanity. Her first thought was relief that it was still there. In the past month, she had lost nearly everything she had—now it seemed she had lost even the right to her own person. But this precious thing had been left to her. So many years ago, the coat had been given to her by a kind stranger, along with a gift of words: “I like your persistence. Keep up that stubborn streak and you can do anything you like. Just keep trying and don't give up.”

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She could no longer remember what he looked like or the sound of his voice, but the words had woven themselves into the very fabric of the old, brown suede so that they whispered to her with every movement. The words, so simple, so profound, had brought her through many difficult days, hours, moments in her life. She had often found herself pondering them: “Would he like my persistence today? What does ‘not giving up’ look like in this situation? How do I ‘keep trying’ this time?”

‘Not dying’ seemed to her the only way of ‘not giving up’ at the moment. The coat would help—perhaps she would not die of hypothermia. She drew it close around her and tried opening her eyes to see where she was, but only one of them seemed to be in working order. Unable to focus, she could tell nevertheless that she was not where she had been. He had taken what he wanted from her, done what he pleased to her, and dumped her in an unfamiliar alley by the rubbish bins. Indignation rose in her and she tried to grit her teeth only to discover her jaw was not working properly. A swift vision of a vicious boot aimed at her head made her squeeze her eye shut again and shudder, not daring to make a sound. What if he were still near? What if he heard her and attacked her again? She stroked the softness of the suede and tried to control her shaking breath.

But nothing happened for a long time. Perhaps he was truly gone. Blindly, gingerly, she explored the rest of herself with trembling, cold-thickened fingers. He had not bothered pulling off the coat, but her jumper and bra were pushed up around her neck. Her bruised stomach felt hot and swollen to the touch. Torn skirt and knickers were in a tangled heap beside her; she was naked from the waist down except for her gym shoes and socks. A tentative touch found open wounds slick with blood, and she gave way to a horrified wail of agony as she realized he had made good on his furious promise to make use of the bottle she had broken over his head. She wept, the tears hot on her frozen face, biting her lips, trying to stay quiet, sobbing with cold and despair and terror and fury.

Footsteps crunching over the gravel of the alleyway stopped her tears and froze every muscle as she steeled herself for another assault. ‘Not giving up’ might now mean fighting back—although her struggle against her assailant had been futile the first time, she would not

allow him to touch her again without some cost to himself. She tried to control her breathing, which was still coming in short, painful gasps, and clutched her coat close around herself.

A cursed exclamation. "Bloody hell! Call 999, Dave!" a voice cried.

"Don't put your coat over her, you moron! We gotta get outa here! Cops'll think we done this!" another voice hissed.

"Well, I'm calling, anyway," the first voice insisted.

She could hear him talking to the emergency call-handler as their footsteps receded quickly back down the alley. She let out a long, shaking breath, both relieved and bereft. A long, cold, painful time passed. "Keep up that stubborn streak," the brown suede rustled gently into the frigid air. "I'm not giving up," she wanted to reply, but her mouth was broken. She thought the words instead, hardâ€œimagined them solid and warm and wrapped around her like armour. And then she heard a siren's wail in the distance. She clung to her coat with numb fingers and allowed herself to slip into oblivion.

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Ten years earlier, a young John Watson picked a half-frozen child up out of the snow and gave his spare coat to her, along with a few casual words of encouragement. For a man who went on to spend his life in serving othersâ€œsaving perhaps hundreds of lives both as a soldier and as a doctorâ€œthis simple act of kindness to an anonymous six-year-old might seem to be the least significant of his many noteworthy deeds.

2. Chapter 2

The snow-drift in which she had suddenly sat was so, so cold. She had been cold enough already, playing as she was in the snow wearing inadequate clothing. But now the freezing damp made her shiver uncontrollably. "Are you okay?" he asked with honest concern in his kind and beautiful eyes, gently touching her stinging cheek. He picked her up and set her on her feet, brushing the snow away with gentle hands. Warmth enveloped her as he helped her into a new brown coat, much too big for her, and buttoned it up snugly. And then he was gone. But his warmth remained, along with words of encouragement wrapped in brown suede: "I like your persistence . . . Just keep trying . . . Don't give up. . . ." _

But a deep, gruff voice was insisting she wake from her pleasant dream, and hands the size of a bear's paws were grasping her shoulders. Through the fog in her mind, she realized slowly that she was no longer six years old and she was not playing in the snow. Anger seized her, and she felt a furious roar rip from her throat as she clawed blindly at the person who dared touch her. Pain, sharp and intense, spiked through her skull as she desperately tried to scream at the intruder, all sound with no coherent words.

The huge paws easily imprisoned her small hands, but they were oddly gentle, and the stranger's voice was kind and rhythmically reassuring. Gradually she became aware of what he was saying: "It's

all right, child, you're safe. I'm here to help, child, calm down."

But she couldn't let her guard down. In her short life, she had learned that people were unreliable at best—"most were treacherous and deceitful as a rule. She could count on the fingers of one hand the number of those she had met with whom she had felt safe. She struggled against him, although she was growing very weak, determined not to give up without a fight.

Fighting was futile. He barely noticed her resistance, calling orders over his shoulder to someone else who was approaching them: "There you are, Keene, about bloody time. Don't just stand there gawking, man, off with you to flag down the ambulance! They'll never spot us down here from the street. Useless as a lamppost without a light, you are."

And then he said to her, in a surprisingly gentle tone, "I'm with the police, child. I won't let anyone else harm you, I promise." Something in his voice made her open her one good eye and try to focus; she grew still and studied this police officer, this bear of a man, who promised to protect her. From a young age, she had practiced the art of deducing a person's character from quick observations; she took in the genuine concern in his brown eyes, the friendly lines on his face, the sincerity of his expression. This was a stranger's face, and yet she recognized him immediately as a man of integrity and kindness. Convinced, she sobbed in relief and let herself go limp. She could trust this man, she knew; he had the look of another policeman whom she'd met when she was small.

Once, long ago, a sad-eyed policeman had taken the time to sit and listen to a defiant and frustrated little six-year-old run-away and understand her heart. Where others saw a mischievous trouble-maker and a wild, wilful burden to be dealt with, he saw a charming, home-sick urchin who was crying out for affection and attention in the only way she knew. He seemed to know all in a few minutes what she had been trying a lifetime to say—"that she was lonely and desperate for love and stability and care. He felt she was worthy of his attention and he wanted to protect her from the cruelty of the world. The greater part of her sense of self-worth was born in that singular encounter with a stranger who dared to care about her, to be reinforced months later by another stranger with a brown suede coat.

But she could not be his little girl, no matter how much she might have longed for a father just like him; and he had been forced to take her back to a family that didn't want her, because that is the way the world works. All the same, she had held on to the feeling of safety she had, sitting beside her sad-eyed policeman. Her memory of him gave her great hope. He became in her mind the epitome of all a human being ought to be; his existence assured her that good people did inhabit the world if she could but find them.

This new police officer seemed to have been cut from the same cloth as that iconic man from her past. Now that she was quiet, he released her hands, but she grasped one of his huge paws in both of hers and held on tightly, still sobbing in relief.

Gently he disentangled his hand from hers as he soothed, "Let the paramedics help you, child. I'll be right over here, don't worry.

I'll not leave you."

"Here's your overcoat back, Inspector Gregson," another voice said, and the warmth was lifted from her and replaced with a shock blanket. Other hands examined her and prepared her for transport, and other voices were speaking to one another concerning her treatment; but all the time she was listening to the bear-man's gruff voice, growling orders as his forensics team arrived, directing the investigation of the crime as he hovered near.

"It's certain the assault didn't take place here. Spread out, find anything you can that might lead to the actual crime scene. Sergeant Beal, I'll have an evidence bag here for this clothing Ta. No, no, I'll hang onto this, you have a look through the rubbish bins there. . . . Here, you twoâ€"go door to door! The child was dropped here sometime in the dead of night, but someone may have seen or heard something. . . . Hi, there, Knutson! What the hell are you still doing here? Go back to the station and search the databases for a girl of her description. Someone knows who this child is and where she came from, and I want to know it myself by the end of the day. . . . Are you daft, man? She's not homelessâ€"have you eyes? Get busy, you lot! I will have results this day or I'll know the reason why!" Intrigued by his insights into her attack, she was distracted from the pain and from the paramedic's ministrations by his authoritative tone and confident manner.

By this time, she was being loaded into the ambulance. Before they closed the door, the bear-man approached her once again. "I'll be along soon, don't you worry, child," he assured her. "They'll take good care of you, in the meantime." To the paramedic, he asked, "Is Dr Joseph Bell on shift today, do you know?"

"I believe so, Inspector. Shall I call ahead and ask him to meet us?"

"Please do. He'll be interested in this one; and I'll need his deductive abilities if I'm to catch the bastard that did this," the detective inspector replied. "We need to find the brute, but we've no place to start. Tell him I'll be along directly. Oh, and give this to himâ€"he'll know what to do with it."

"But, Inspector, isn't this evidence? Shouldn't you"

"I need the doc to have a look. I'll collect it in due time. Just do as I say," was the emphatic reply.

The doors slammed shut and the sirens wailed as the ambulance zipped through the streets to hospital.

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Ten years earlier, Detective Sergeant Greg Lestrade found himself minding a deceptively angelic-looking six-year-old who was apparently trying to run away to India. Although he spent only a few short hours with her and never learned her proper name, still the blue-eyed child had entangled her tiny fingers around his paternal heart and never let it go. It had grieved him to be forced to take her back to a family who was obviously neglectful and emotionally abusive, but what choice did he have? For many years afterwards, he often thought of the blue-eyed child and wished he could have done something, just any

small thing, to ease her way through a hard, cruel world.

3. Chapter 3

Special thanks to the talented and generous Fang's Fawn for allowing me to borrow her version of Dr Joseph Bell for this story. If you have not read her story "An Innocent Man" and met her Dr Bell for yourself, you must give yourself this special treat and read it right away!

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She had never felt as safe in all her life as she had with the sad-eyed policeman. Although she had told the boy in the park who had found her and brought her here that she was willing to go back to her cousin's house, now she could not bear to think of it. Her six-year-old heart had hoped that if she refused to tell her name, he would have no choice but to take her home with him and be a father to her. He would surely not ignore her as her own father had, or get drunk and yell at her, or tell her dreadful lies. He would surely not put her on an aeroplane all alone and send her a million miles away to live with strangers who didn't really want her. "I'm sorry," her policeman said as he drove her back to her real life, and she could see by his sad eyes that he really meant it. "I wish I could help you. But you're a fighter, aren't you? You're the sort to rise above your circumstances. Just be yourself, my girl, and don't give up, and you'll be okay"

"I'm not giving up," she tried to reply, but her mouth wouldn't work and neither would anything else. As her mind rose from her dream and came hazily back into the present, she was vaguely aware that she had a body somewhere, but it was far away and disconnected. The pain was still existent, persistent, although pushed back into submission as if it were a badly-suppressed memory.

She floated along in a drugged fog until eventually a great hand was placed on her head, bringing her mind back into reality. She tried to open her eyes, but found her body was still unresponsive. But the hand was a familiar one—the touch was not threatening. It felt more like a blessing.

"Told you I'd be along, child," a gravelly voice rasped. This was apparently the bear-man's best attempt at a whisper. "Taking good care of you, are they? You're looking better than last I saw you." She longed to smile at him, to no avail.

"Detective Inspector Gregson, I understand you have been menacing the staff again," a soft, Scottish brogue spoke suddenly.

"Doctor Bell, the staff know me and ought to let me do my proper job," the detective growled in return. She was gratified to hear them chuckle together and realized this was a meeting of old friends. She heard the soft clap of hands clasping in fond greeting.

"Tobiah, it's been months since I've laid eyes on you, lad," the doctor-voice said affectionately.

"Fortunately, there've been blessedly few incidents like this for us to deal with lately," the bear-man replied. "How is the child,

Doc?"

"She'll mend," Dr Joseph Bell said, but she thought he sounded sad. "The breaks were clean and didn't need surgery, although her jaws are wired shut. The internal bruising and the lacerations will heal in time. It's the infection that worries meâ€"but she's a fighter, this one! She'll not give up easily."

"Don't I know it!" the detective agreed, and she was surprised to hear admiration and even affection in his tone. "She near clawed my eyes out before I convinced her I wasn't a threat."

"Well, if you're here for a statement, lad, you'll not get one for some time. I have her on a strong pain medication that should keep her unconscious for the most part," the doctor warned.

"I assumed as much. I'm here to talk to you, Doc; but I promised the child I'd look in on her. I'm glad she'll recover. Shall we?" She heard a door open and footsteps, both light and heavy, moving through it.

"Keep referring to her as 'child', my lad, and she may wake and finish clawing out those eyes of yours," the doctor remarked with some amusement as the door fell shut. It seemed, however, that the two men remained just outside it, as she could still hear every word they said. "She's sixteen years old if she's a day."

"If she's younger than I, she's a child, old man," Tobiah Gregson returned affectionately,

"Any luck finding the lass's identity?" Dr Bell asked. She liked his voice. It sounded like singing.

The bear-man harrumphed, sounding annoyed. "No, none at all. She's been dropped into Reading from nowhere, it seems. No one's reported her missing, she's not listed as a run-away, she's not registered in any school in the area, no one in the neighbourhood has seen her before. All my hopes are pinned on you, Doc. What have you found out for me?"

"Well, I'll tell you this, ladâ€"find where the girl was staying and you'll find your crime scene-a kitchen, or perhaps a pantry; I'll stake my reputation on it. And furthermore, I'll wager the child was recently placed in foster care." Dr Bell's voice lowered confidently, and she strained to hear him. "It's the olive oil that gives the show away."

"Ah," D.I. Gregson grunted wisely. "That would be the stuff that was splashed all over her coat." Her coat. She felt bereft as she thought of it and wondered if she would ever see it again.

"Aye, and in her hair, and on the clothes you sent along to me in the evidence bag; and even on her shoes. And in the open wounds, as well," the soft brogue grew harsh with emotion.

"Good God above," the bear-man growled in anger. "How can a man look at that tiny bit of a girl and want to do anything but protect her from harm? She can't be much taller than my arm is long, and weighs less than my right thumb." Hearing this sentiment made her feel warm inside and she wanted to laugh. She hoped she would be able to

properly meet this giant of a man one day.

"She's a bonny wee thing, 'tis true, but not one I'd want to tangle with," the doctor laughed grimly. "She had skin and blood under her nails that don't belong to herâ€"look for a man with a well-scratched face and hands! And from all evidence, when she was attacked she snatched up the first thing that came to hand and smashed him over the head with it; so the culprit will have a bottle-shaped lump to show for himself, you can be sure. Given the size and shape of the bruises he left, he'll be a man of your size, my friendâ€"the print of the knuckles show plainly on her face where he back-handed her, and the toe of his boots made clear impressions on her cheek and abdomen. Take note, my lad: you're looking for a broken one-litre bottle of Il Casolare Unfiltered Extra Virgin Olive Oil. And the residue will still be there, at the scene of the crime, if you find it quickly enough! The man will have tried to clean up his mess in a hurry, but oil is difficult to get rid of completely. Find her foster care-giver's kitchen and you'll find all the evidence you need to get a warrant to test the owner's DNA against what we found on the young woman."

"You deduced the brand name?" D.I. Gregson sounded sceptical.

"Aye," the doctor sighed, "It's a very distinctive shape, the bottle for that brand of oil."

There was a shocked silence for a moment as this statement sunk in. "Good God in heaven help us," the policeman groaned, aggrieved, at last. "Will she want to give evidence in court against the damned bloody brute, when it's this sort of evidence that's to be given?"

"Perhaps not. But I have a feeling that she's not the type to be giving up. The lass has spirit, I'll warrant."

Another silence as the detective gathered his thoughts. "How do you figure about the foster care, then, Doc?" he asked at last. "That coatâ€"it were at least ten years old, and a man's, not to mention a sight too large for her. Made my boys assume she's homeless. Of course, one look at how well-kempt her hair and nails were told me otherwise. But foster-care?"

"Her jumper, skirt, and shoes are brand-new, Tobiah," Dr Bell said sombrely, speaking quickly and quietly. "I would swear those shoes could not be more than one week old. But her underthings are old and worn, stretched out with use. Her stockings have been mended a number of times. Do you think a young girl would buy new clothes for herself and neglect to purchase new undergarments? Someone needed her to look good on the outside but didn't care enough to provide for proper underclothing. She's new to Reading, as you've observed, not been here long enough to register for school. If a loving family had moved here and could afford those new clothes, they would have also bought her all she needed to be both comfortable and presentable; if she is from a negligent family, they would not have bothered with making her look presentable at all. But a foster care situation has certain standards that must be maintained by law."

D.I. Gregson gave a harsh, mirthless laugh. "Well done, Doc. I'll direct my team to investigate according to your deductions. But damn me, Joseph Bell, when are you coming to work for me, instead of

leaving me at the mercy of these worthless morons? You could be my entire forensics team all on your own."

"You do them an injustice, lad," the soft brogue admonished. "And as for myself, I have no desire for police work. I only help you to help my patients. I'm a healer, not a copper," he continued kindly.

"True, your place is here, I know. I've heard it said that you can diagnose a patient's illness by watching him walk into your waiting room."

Their voices faded away as they walked together down the hospital corridor. She lay there, struck by the astute deductions made by the insightful Dr Joseph Bell. His leaps of logic and eye for the minutiae reminded her of the boy in the park, who had found her as a six-year-old runaway and instantly had known she had come from India, how long she had been in England, who her father was, and why she had left her new London home. She had been in awe of him, and afterwards grateful to him for persuading her not to try her luck living rough on the streets of a strange city, and for taking her to her sad-eyed policeman.

She had been fascinated by the boy's cleverness; and he had thought her clever as well, and had spent the time it took to travel from Hyde Park to New Scotland Yard teaching her a game he called "deductions", starting her on the basics of observing details and extrapolating truth from them. Over the years, she had practiced this game of his and had become quite good at it, especially at discerning the character of strangers quickly—a skill that had served her well in many situations. If the young man with the brown coat had given her the will and means to survive and the sad-eyed policeman had imbued her with self-worth, the boy in the park had reinforced in her a stalwart self-confidence and a trust in her own native intelligence that rarely let her down.

But she was worn out with consciousness and her mind began to fade into sleep. And her fight was not over yet: as she slept, an infection took hold and a fever began to burn.

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Ten years earlier, a fourteen-year-old Sherlock Holmes had found a runaway child in Hyde Park and had spent a few enjoyable hours with her, impressed with her cleverness and courage. Concerned for the safety of a six-year-old alone on the streets of London, he placed her into the care of one Detective Sergeant Lestrade of Scotland Yard; and then, feeling sheepish about how much he had quickly come to care for the girl, he deleted her memory from his mind palace immediately.

4. Chapter 4

The boy in the park was touchingly concerned for her safety. But unlike every adult in her six-year-old life, he did not try to manipulate her with lies. His almost brutal honesty was a gift to her. "There are people in this city, unfortunately, who would hurt you without giving it a second thought; who would use you for their own dubious pleasure. There are many criminals in this cold world who

would think nothing of harming a child, I'm afraid," he said quite frankly, even as London, Hyde Park, the tree under which they sat, began to fade away. "I know it," she whispered, floating away._

Memory segued into dream, and suddenly the boy was talking to her present, sixteen-year-old self in a hospital in Reading. It was odd that she was now a bit older than the boy was, a bit more worldly-wise—but still quite a lot shorter and rather less clever than he. "I taught you to discern intentions," he said sternly, disapprovingly; but she smiled at him in her dream, knowing that his scowl was caused by concern for her well-being.

"I've been deducing people as you taught me for the past ten years," she assured him. "It's kept me safe for a long time. I miscalculated this time; I'd avoided him successfully for two weeks, but it was exhausting. So I made a mistake, and he was waiting for me."

"Clever girl, using the olive oil bottle. You've spread evidence all over the kitchen—he'll be in too much haste to find it all. And you fought him well. You didn't give up."

"I might be in better condition now if I hadn't," she murmured ruefully.

"You were true to yourself," the sad-eyed policeman said affectionately, and it didn't seem strange to her that he was in the room with them. "You stood up for yourself. You're worth fighting for, my girl."

"Now it's time to make use of that persistence of yours," the young man with the kind and beautiful eyes said earnestly, holding the brown suede coat in his hands. "You can fight this. You can get well, if you don't give up."

"I'm not giving up," she rasped hoarsely through gritted teeth, and the sound of her own voice pulled her out of unconsciousness. There was no answer but the beeping of the machinery by her hospital bed. Slowly she attempted to open her eyes and found that she had regained control of her body. To her foggy delight, she realized that she could now see through both eyes. The pain was back, but muted; and she was so very tired. She drifted back into a healthy, unfevered sleep.

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"Miss Mary Morstan, I presume," the soft, Scottish brogue wafted gently from the direction of the doorway. She opened her eyes to see a middle-aged man with light brown hair fading to grey and a pleasant face dominated by a hawk-like nose, his long white coat flapping as he bustled into the room. His eyes, blue as summer skies, smiled into hers.

"Dr Bell," she smiled back; or tried to smile, but felt that with her wired-shut jaws and still-swollen face her effort was probably barely perceptible, if not utterly futile.

But Dr Bell was a perceptive man. "Ah, you'll have that lovely smile back soon, my dear, never fear," he assured her cheerfully.

She was pleased to meet this brilliant man at last. All that day a veritable army of nurses had passed in and out of that door-changing dressings, checking vital signs, administering medicines, feeding her through a straw-and she had endured them patiently. But here was the man she had been waiting to see—the man who had looked at the meagre evidence of her attack and had somehow seen the way it had happened with amazing accuracy.

"It's about time you came back to us, lass. I was beginning to wonder if I'd ever have the privilege of seeing the colour of your eyes." His words were charming, but his eyes were sharp and looked her over shrewdly. "Temperature still higher than I'd like, and pulse a mite too fast," he murmured, although he had not yet touched her or looked at the readouts on the monitors. "Colour is better, though. It was a grand fight and a long, hard week, but you've beaten the infection in the end. I knew you weren't one for giving up."

A sense of loss drifted through her. "My coat," she sighed softly, assuming it was gone forever.

"It's safe; it's being held in evidence," the doctor informed her. "Now let's have a proper look at you." And he began his official examination, using hands and instruments instead of just eyes, enumerating her injuries as he went and assessing their progress. Concussion: no longer a concern. Black eye: swelling down and vision fully returned. Broken jaw: wired and mending nicely ("But it's meals through a straw for another five weeks, I'm afraid, lass"). Cracked ribs: healing quickly. Internal bruising: no permanent damage. Lacerations: sutured with minimum scarring. "It's the infection that set in that was the worst of it, I'm afraid," he said soberly. "You must be prepared that it caused a good deal of internal scarring. It may well be that bearing children is not in your future."

She tried to imagine ever wanting to bring a child into this world that had so many men like her assailant in it, and men like her father, and like a great many other people who through abuse or neglect had made her life so difficult and so painful. "I don't care," she said through her closed teeth and with closed eyes. She was so tired.

"Mmm," he hummed in sympathetic agreement. A long silence hung in the room as he finished his examination of her to his satisfaction, raised her bed to a sitting position, and scribbled notes on a pad. Then came a soft knock on the door.

"Do you feel up to a visitor, lass? That'll be Detective Inspector Gregson at the door, huffing like an old bear. He's been that anxious to speak with you—it was he that found you, you see, and he is the detective in charge of your case."

"All right," she agreed. She was weary, but she did want to meet her bear-man properly at last. The doctor opened the door, and in came a giant with curling, ginger hair and well-trimmed beard and fierce expression which quickly changed to a tender smile as he saw she was awake and sitting up in bed.

"That's what I like to see! Up and in her right mind at last!" he exclaimed, trying to keep his boisterous, gravelly voice at a volume meant for hospital rooms. "How are you feeling, then, Miss

Morstan?"

"Lucid," she said. "And grateful to you. Very grateful. But have you arrested him yet?"

The detective's bushy eyebrows raised and he glanced at the doctor quizzically. "Clever lass," Dr Bell remarked, amused.

"You found out who I am; you must have found him out as well. I left evidence all over the kitchen, and all over his face," she persisted.

"Well, childâ€"erm, young ladyâ€"you tell me who your assailant was and I'll confirm whether I've arrested the correct suspect," DI Gregson said, pulling out a tape recorder.

She could hardly bear to have to speak his hateful name, but neither could she bear to see the brute go free because of a technicality in court. She spoke each word slowly, as precisely as she could, so as to be understood in spite of her wired-shut jaws. "Nat Denton. His wife is my second cousin. My father disappeared over a month ago and they agreed to take me in. I'd been living with them for two weeks, and I'd managed to stay out of his way until . . . I was so tired, staying awake nights to keep watch and all . . . I let my guard down, thought he'd gone outâ€"he cornered me in the kitchen . . ." She stopped, mouth aching, utterly exhausted.

The detective snapped off the machine. "That's good enough for now, child," he told her gently, and the doctor kicked his foot. "Erm, young lady," he corrected hastily. Mary, quite certain she'd not been a child since she was six years old, wistfully found herself wishing he would continue calling her by that term of endearment.

"Don't you worry," DI Gregson continued, "the bloody blackguard is in custody. Tried to tell me you'd run away days before, and him with a well-scratched face and a great bloody knot on his head where you beaned him. Found his poor wife, on her knees, nearly prostrate with terror, tryin' to clean up the kitchen; but you did a fine job spreading evidence about! And then there was the broken bottle, still in the dustbin in the man's own house, along with the rags they'd been sopping up the mess with." He didn't say that the rags were soaked with her own blood as well as the olive oil she'd spewed all over the room.

"Turns out the bastard has a file of complaints against him as long as my leg," The detective went on with a fierce look. "AND he's done time in prison for assault, as well. The moron who decided that would be a good home for you needs to be tied to a post and horse-whipped, in my humble opinion."

The doctor laid a steadying hand on his friend's arm. "There now, Tobiah, I've not been idle these six days. I have a young relative, a distant cousin, who occupies a minor position in the British Government. Brilliant lad, taught him everything I knew about deductive reasoning. I spoke to him about your case, my dear-emphasizing the embarrassment to the government this would cause should it be mentioned to the press, and he agreed to intervene on your behalf."

She closed her eyes, suddenly overwhelmed with exhaustion. "Thank

you," she whispered. "Thank you both, so much."

"There now, lass, it's time we left you to rest," Dr Bell said sympathetically. "Off we go, Tobiah." She was asleep before they had even shut the door.

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She stepped outside of the Reading County Courthouse and lifted her face to the sunshine. She was free. She'd never in her life been so free.

In the face of the overwhelming evidence, and at the strongly-worded advice of the counsel for the defence, Nat Denton had pled guilty and would soon be on his way to serve his sentence of ten years in prison. One year for each of the ten nightmarish months he'd just put her through: months in which it seemed not one day had gone by but that she had to retell and relive her experience in some way. Investigators and solicitors needed to make certain their case was air-tight; doctors and therapists tried to help her recover from the realities of her ordeal; government officials and representatives of the armed services needed to be sure of who was culpable. She had not had to speak in court, to her admitted relief, although she would have done, and gladly, in spite of the content of the evidence she would have had to present.

"Off to London, then?" Dr Bell stepped up beside her. "It's good riddance to this dismal city for you, I imagine."

She smiled at him brightly. "It hasn't been all dismal," she assured him. "I am grateful to you for all you've done." His young relative in the British Government has spoken words into the correct ears and expedited a hefty compensatory settlement that would pay for university and allow her to live in her own in a flat in London for some time. In addition, the army had settled her father's pension on her, giving her a bit of income to live on—“an independent life at last, never again to be at the mercy of negligent or abusive strangers. And then today, a letter had been delivered to her in the courthouse—“a thick wad of hundred pound notes with a type-written message that read simply: "From a friend of your father's with regrets". It seemed she was now to build a new life upon the financial foundation of other people's guilt. She was all right with that.

DI Gregson joined them as they walked down Friar Street, away from the looming courthouse. "Congratulations, Miss Morstan," he boomed in his gruff voice. "I hear you've been accepted to King's College! Well done, child! Erm, young lady! I know how hard you've worked for it."

Indeed, highly motivated and in need of distraction, Mary had thrown herself into her studies, passing all of her A-levels in record time. "Thank you," she murmured, blushing under his praise.

"A fine doctor you'll be," he continued, "although I could wish you'd put your considerable cleverness into police work."

"Perhaps I will one day," Mary said, dimples deepening. "Dr Bell does police work on his patients' behalf—“why shouldn't I?"

"That he does!" the bear-man roared with laughter. "He deduced one more little thing on behalf of yourselfâ€"he told me to bring you this." He produced a squashy package and handed it to her.

Her old brown, suede coat, so shabby and stained, whispered encouraging words to her as she stroked its softness. "Thank you, Inspector. Thank you for everything," she said. "I'll never forget either of you. You've done so much for me."

She soon boarded the train for London, never to set foot in Reading again.

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Ten years later, Doctor Mary Morstan walked into her newest place of employment, a clinic in Westminster, and thought it looked as good a place as any to settle in for a while. Dr Sarah Sawyer, who had hired her on in spite of her record of restlessly roaming from job to job, met her at the door and began showing her around, introducing her to the others.

"And this is John Watson, one of our locum practitioners." Sarah presented her to a blond man in his late thirties and Mary looked at him with interest. His military bearing set him apart from the other doctors, and his kind, beautiful eyes and brilliant smile intrigued her.

"Pleasure to meet you," she said cheerfully. She thought it might be time to be giving up her life of roaming about and stay in this place for a while.

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Again, my heartfelt thanks to the most lovely and wonderful mrs pencil, Fang's Fawn, and Wynsom. What would I do without you ladies?

To find out more about the mysterious letter and guilt money Mary receives, read "Mary" and "Oddly Detached".

To read more about Mary's past in this AU, read "Boscombe Pond", "To Hold His Hand", "To Hold Her Heart", and "Chance Meetings".

End
file.